Commonly Asked Questions about Halloween and Native Americans

1. Aren’t we honoring you? No, true honor means that mutual assent is required. You can say you are honoring Native Americans, but if the majority of Native Americans do not agree that it is an honor then it is not.

2. Aren’t you just being oversensitive? Don’t you have more important things to worry about? People don’t see culturally appropriated costumes as affecting the real world, but it affects Native Americans and other people of color. It is especially detrimental when Native Americans are fighting for our civil rights if our cultures are viewed as not being legitimate (or make believe). In addition, there are many studies showing these stereotypes have negative psychological effects on Native American people, especially children.

3. Isn’t this just a difference of opinion that is up for debate? As Native Americans, we are the ones most qualified to know what is offensive to our own culture. If Native Americans tell you it’s offensive, that should be enough. It is not up for debate by those whose race and cultures are not being represented.

4. Isn’t dressing up as Native American like dressing up as a Viking? There are people alive today who can say that they are descended from the Vikings. However, the Viking culture is something of the past. In contrast, Native Americans are part of a living culture, comprised of over 500 tribes. Native Americans today have 135-155 different languages that are still spoken, distinct tribal histories that are still passed down, and traditional religions that are still practiced.

5. What about the Fighting Irish at Notre Dame? The Fighting Irish mascot is a leprechaun. Leprechauns are fictional creatures that do not exist in reality. Therefore, leprechauns are not affected by real life, every day harmful stereotypes.

6. Aren’t Native Americans appropriating white culture when they dress up as a character that is white? There is a power and privilege dynamic. When you see a white person on a television show, nobody assumes that ALL white people are like that person. Instead, they are seen as an individual. When a Native American or person of color is on television, because it is so rare, people are more likely to form stereotypes of that group based on the individual portrayal of this character. This is the same with costumes. When dressed as a white character it is recognized that you are portraying a specific character, not an entire race or ethnicity.

7. Is it okay then, if I go as a specific Native American character like Pocahontas? No, because the way that Pocahontas and most other Native American characters are portrayed are still historically inaccurate stereotypes. (The entire Pocahontas story is problematic if you realize she was 9 or 10 when she met the almost 30 year old John Smith. Pocahontas was essentially sold into sexual slavery to John Rolfe, “her husband.”)